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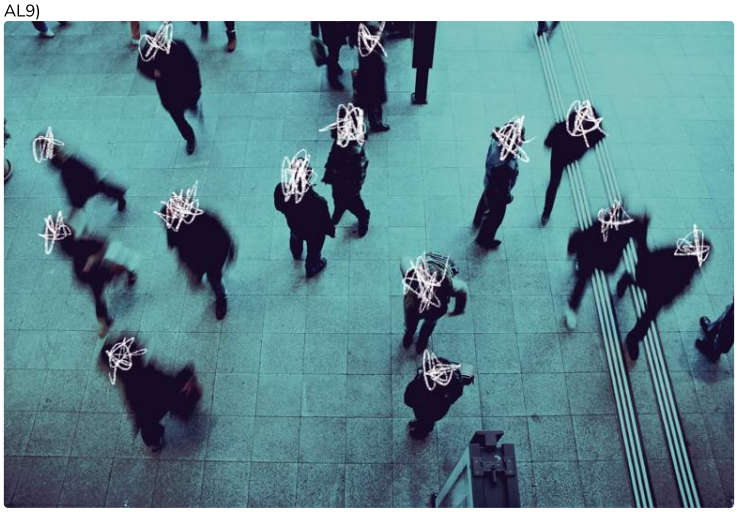
A frenzy of forgetting



25 million people have died in the last 3.5 years of the pandemic. The best estimate is that 400 million people have to varying degrees been disabled by long covid.

The number of dead exceeds the number killed in world war one by nearly 10 million. And in less time.

In Europe more than 2 million have officially died of covid, likely a vast undercount.

In the US, the official 1.1 million dead is nearly double that of the 1918 'Spanish' flu.

Covid's death toll is likely, in the coming months/years, to overtake the US civil war (1.5 million dead) to become the worst mass fatality event in US history.

A colossal amount of death and disability has been squeezed into a sliver of time.

And in the midst of this carnage, there is a determination to forget.

From politicians, to the media, to public health bodies, a determined effort is being made to avoid the subject, which has inevitably trickled down into the public consciousness.

Never mind that it is the leading cause of death by infectious disease. Never mind that it continues to evolve and shoot out variants that escape immunity. Never mind that 1 in 10 infections results in disability. Never mind that by any rational measure, it is far from over.

Journalists barely write about it. Politicians don't mention it. Rich people get ill and it never crosses their lips. Bringing it up in polite company is strongly discouraged. Covid has now become a taboo word, evidenced by the "summer flu" neologism people are employing to avoid engaging with covid.

Sadly this is not a new experience for humanity. We've been here before.

It took years for governments to acknowledge the AIDS epidemic. Years of mass death before any public recognition. A similar process of dissociation occurred after the 1918 flu, its erasure from collective memory swift and

efficient.

And indeed, early in this pandemic, the lack of memorials to the 1918 pandemic and its absence from culture was much commented on by our media. Outlets from the New York Times to The Guardian told us how strange that was. How insensitive. And how different it would be this time.

This time, they said, we're not just going to move on. We're going to remember.

Before quickly moving on and forgetting.

At least the folks from the 1920s had the excuse of the first world war as a distraction.

There have been attempts at memorialising, but they've been meek and tokenistic. An unsanctioned wall in London that people began drawing hearts on. London's mayor planted some trees. Some flags were laid on the National Mall in Washington DC. Some murals were drawn in New York.

What would it mean to truly memorialise the dead and disabled? It wouldn't mean impromptu heart walls here, a few trees there, some flags.

Truly coming to terms with this pandemic would mean encouraging, mandating, and embedding change across society in recognition of the mass death event we have lived though.

It would mean at a minimum maintaining the requirement to wear a mask in hospitals and medical settings.

It would mean government funding for the upgrade of air purification systems in all public indoor spaces.

It would mean ongoing education that covid is airborne, that it harms your immune system, that it can imperil many organs in your body.

It would mean a full-time public health campaign.

It would mean actively attempting to reduce harm, forever.

None of these things are happening.

Instead, living with covid has come to mean ignoring covid.

Governments are even admitting that their covid policy is no longer based on reality, but on the desire to feel normal. To forget. The UK government recently changed its covid booster and flu vaccine policy with the explicitly stated reason of "returning to normal."

As if biological reality cares about what you think is normal. As if a social construction of reality can over-ride a brute fact.

There's a concept in social psychology called social or cultural amnesia.

Just as individuals have cognitive mechanisms to forget painful truths or traumatic events, so do groups of people. People often want to feel safe more than they actually want to be safe.

I think this is what we are seeing now.

And bad actors and institutions desperate to keep the machine ticking over are able to exploit this glitch in our makeup to push ideas that are comforting. Like a pandemic being over. Or a climate that's always changed.

Real safety would mean fundamentally changing economic and social systems. It would mean challenging the institutions and structures upon which our whole cultural edifice is constructed.

And our leaders know this. So instead they tell us stories to make us feel safe.

The reality is many countries' histories are riddled with cultural amnesia. It is

painful to learn the truth about the murder, exploitation and death upon which our societies rest, especially in the colonial world. And the institutions that govern us are aware that people on the whole would prefer not to know.

And sometimes governments even turn forgetting into a civic virtue.

After the end of the Franco regime in Spain at in the late 70s, the country agreed, through its political institutions, on an official Pact of Forgetting. El Pacto de Olvido. They agreed it was best for there to be no accountability for the many thousands tortured, executed, forced into exile. That it was better for there to be no reckoning with the fascist coup that overthrew a democratically elected republican government. The pact also committed the government to “la desmemoria” (disremembering), which meant anything that could awaken the memory of the past was banned, such as the observation of the 50th anniversary of the war, a truth commission, or the exhumation of remains.

This is why human remains still lie scattered across the Spanish countryside, many in mass graves. It was literally illegal to try and find them. That has changed recently. A new law – the law of democratic memory - passed in 2022 provides funds and government assistance for people to locate the remains of family members that died.

Because Spain realised that just trying to forget mass death doesn’t work.

That such deep wounds can’t heal unless they are acknowledged.

That ignorance can never ultimately be bliss.

(This post first appeared on my newsletter. If you value my writing and would like to support me please consider signing up: https://donotpanic.substack.com/)

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